viewpoint CRAIG WASHINGTON

Does the Bush administration's bullet have to be inscribed 'for gays only' to be deemed a threat that demands our attention?

The prize is right

IN CHRIS CRAIN'S EDITORIAL, "Make ights not war" (Jan. 17), he disparages those gay organizations, particularly the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, that have officially denounced the Bush administration's plans to attack Iraq.

When it comes to keeping their "eyes on the prize," he argues, "apparently a number of gay organizations could use some corrective lenses." The metaphor suggests that faulty vision is to blame for the Task Force decision to join the broad-based anti-war coalition known as "Win Without War." But Crain's claim that these "idealogues" are furthering personal agendas implies egotism, not clouded eyesight.

Crain warns that such reactionary support for a non-gay issue siphons limited resources from an already beleaguered movement. This argument raises three loaded questions: Should gay groups participate in peace activism? Is there a singular prize for which gay liberation strives? What really keeps us from coming anywhere near it or them?

TO UNDERSTAND NGTLF'S DECISION to participate in the anti-war effort, we need only to understand the organization's mission. That is to ensure the full participation of all humanity (foremost but not exclusively LGBT people) at the table of democracy.

To do so, NGLTF and other gay groups address issues, including affirmative action, poverty and abortion rights, deemed irrelevant to LGBT organizing by those who spurn coalitions with other movements and those whose sole self-perceived disqualification from the table is their queerness.

To challenge America's war cry is to not only sit at the table but also to speak out. This unprovoked war will cost lives, invoke untold suffering and invite future terrorist attacks here and abroad. Why do our bloody hands clutch our star-spangled broche when we hear how many around the world rebuke us for disrespecting those we cannot dominate?

"Conscription for war is inconsistent with freedom of conscience," said Bayard Rustin, a black gay pacifist and principal organizer for the 1963 March on Washington. "The proof that one truly believes is in action."

NGLTF has acted; they have proven their belief, as has the White House. This administration's policies have already demonstrated animus toward LGBT people, people of color here and abroad, people with AIDS and immigrants of color.

Military aggression will only heighten the scapegoating, violence, discrimination and social service cutbacks. Does the bullet have to be inscribed "for gays only" to be deemed a threat that demands our attention? Until the gay movement fully addresses its own panoply of "isms" and schisms, it will remain a largely separatist struggle that too often solicits the support of other movements and peoples it abandons in turn.

FOR NEARLY TWO DECADES, THE U.S. gay and lesbian political movement has focused on two primary goals, most visibly represented by two preeminent national organizations: The legal and political rights single-issue wing led by the Human Rights Campaign, and the broader human rights, multi-issue wing of which the NGLTF is the most popular vanguard.

The HRC strategy vies to mainstream gays into preexisting rights and privileges. For NGLTF and others, the prize is the attainment of civil and political rights for gays through the dismantling of multiple oppression systems.

Crudely put, HRC and similar groups negotiate a place for gays at the traditionally-exclusive table while NGLTF and its ilk negotiate for the inclusion of LGBT people and others uninvited (people of color, women, immigrants, the poor); and sometimes, for a reconfiguring of the table itself.

There is considerable common ground between these connected — yet distinct — rewards, since both would confer rights and freedom from oppression for LGBT people. It would seem that the overlap could sustain fruitful collaboration between the two dominant arms of the movement.

History shows that no major movement goes unscathed by internal divisions and cannibalism. Yet we cannot accept disabling disunity as a necessary evil.

It is not LGBT engagement in pacifist work that drains our energy or our coffers. It is the "either/or" camp divisions of which Urvashi Vaid so eloquently speaks in her book "Virtual Equality" that demoralizes organizers and discourages would-be donors and volunteers.

I have shifted from berating to alternately challenging and writing checks to both types of LGBT organizations because I recognize the progress they have won us. We should recognize their right as social justice organizations to express their beliefs and opinions or to remain silent on the issue of war.

Craig Washington is executive director of the Atlanta Gay & Lesbian Center, but the views expressed here are his own. He can be reached through this publication.

viewpoint RODGER STREITMATTER

The best hope for winning over hearts and minds is visibility, and that makes Seventeen magazine and MTV our allies.

Our real progress is in the media

EIGHT OUT OF EVERY 10 GAY YOUNG people in this country has to endure being taunted and bullied, according to a National Mental Health Association survey. My suggestion for fighting this rampant harassment involves two forces that may at first seem ill-suited to the task: Seventeen magazine and MTV.

I propose these two unlikely foot soldiers because of the findings of a relatively small-scale study that I recently conducted with my students at American University. The impetus for my project was my belief that teen-oriented magazines and TV shows have huge impact on their readers and viewers.

One part of my study involved magazines. I gave copies of four articles about gay teenagers to 200 18-year-olds in my classes. I then had the students complete an anonymous survey about their reactions to the seven gay teenagers profiled in the stories.

WHEN I ASKED MY STUDENTS WHICH of the seven subjects in the articles they found the least physically attractive, their overwhelming choice was a girl named Krystal Bennett. That didn't surprise me, as photos showed Krystal to be a large girl who wore her hair in a crew cut and dressed in men's-style suits and neckties.

I was surprised, though, when I asked my students which of the seven subjects they had the "most positive feelings" about, and Krystal was again their top choice.

The article about Krystal, which had appeared in Seventeen magazine, described how she had been harassed during her early teens. At first, she denied being gay and claimed to have a boyfriend in another state. But after awhile, she started acknowledging that she was, indeed, a lesbian.

Krystal's choice paid off, as most of her peers supported her, even to the point of electing her prom king.

The second part of my study involved TV shows. I showed my students clips with gay storylines that had aired on "Dawson's Creek," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "The Real World," and then I asked them to complete another anonymous survey.

This time, the finding that surprised me the most involved how my young students reacted to the gay content. I had purposely shown them clips illustrating a range of material: from a scene with people just talking about homosexuality to a scene showing gay guys in bed together.

MORE THAN 90 PERCENT OF MY STUDENTS were fully comfortable with the clips showing people talking openly about homosexuality, showing two lesbians holding hands and hugging, and showing two gay guys kissing on a public beach.

The response that surprised me the most was that well over half of my students (58 percent) were even comfortable with a clip showing two guys kissing and cuddling while lying shirtless in bed together.

When I asked my students why they weren't shocked by the images, the vast majority of them mentioned "The Real World," the program on MTV that brings seven young strangers together to live and have their every move videotaped and later televised.

"The first time I saw two guys on 'Real World' kissing, I freaked," one of my male students told me. "But after a couple seasons you get used to it. Now it's no big deal."

While I am certainly not opposed to government-sponsored programs designed to reduce the alarming level of harassment that American gay teens have to endure, my study makes me question if education and social service programs are the only answer.

I'm convinced that the best way to reduce homophobia, as well as the harassment that it often leads to, is to increase gay visibility.

My study shows that magazines like Seventeen and TV programs such as "The Real World" are already doing their part.

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www.glaad.org/programs/csms/initiatives.php?

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